



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Art as Utopia: Parsifal and the East German Left

**Citation for published version:**

Kelly, E 2014, 'Art as Utopia: Parsifal and the East German Left' Opera Quarterly, vol. 30, no. 2-3, pp. 246-66. DOI: 10.1093/oq/kbu021

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1093/oq/kbu021](https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbu021)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Opera Quarterly

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Art as Utopia: *Parsifal* and the East German Left**

**Elaine Kelly**

The reception of art in the early years of the German Democratic Republic was governed by two significant factors. The first was the premise that the conditions of state socialism would inevitably yield to a communist utopia. The second was that art would facilitate this evolution by illuminating the seeds for utopian development that already existed both in the GDR and in the Germanic cultural heritage more generally. These axioms came together in Georg Lukács's theory of reflection, which underpinned the Soviet socialist realism that was introduced to East Germany in the wake of World War II. Art, Lukács proclaimed, should provide a depiction "of the subtlety of life, of a richness beyond ordinary experience," through which it can "introduce a new order of things which displaces or modifies the old abstracts."<sup>1</sup>

Opera was held to be an ideal art form in this context. Despite concerns in other Marxist quarters about its elitist connotations and escapist tendencies,<sup>2</sup> adherents of socialist realism were convinced of its value for East German society. Characteristic was Walther

---

<sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács, "Art and Objective Truth," (1954) in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur Kahn (New York: Universal Library, 1971), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Neither Brecht nor Adorno were convinced of the relevance of opera for the twentieth century. See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury, 1976); and Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre: Notes to the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*," (1930) in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 32-42.

Siegmund-Schultze's declaration in 1953 that opera, because of its multifaceted nature, had historically "seemed to offer the best conditions for a vivid reflection of all reality."<sup>3</sup> This perception of opera as a realistic art form found support in the theatrical realism that was championed by Walter Felsenstein at the Komische Oper in East Berlin.<sup>4</sup> Like Lukács, Felsenstein was convinced that art could reveal truths about society that were not accessible through everyday life. Theater, he argued, has the capacity to awaken the connection with the elemental that modern society has obliterated: when modern man "experiences the recreation of the elemental in the theater, he rediscovers once again the elemental in himself."<sup>5</sup> Felsenstein's construct of realism in this context had little to do with mimesis. He was interested not in reproducing the superficial appearances of society on stage but in penetrating its surface to reflect deeper truths. In terms of opera, this involved the immersion of the audience in a unified and credible theatrical experience with the aim of revealing to them a work's inner meaning. As Götz Friedrich and Joachim Herz explain, Felsenstein's *Musiktheater* entailed "the musical and scenic realization of a plot with the goal of translating a work's humanistic content and expressive power into the listening spectator's experiences

---

<sup>3</sup> Walther Siegmund-Schultze, "Zur Frage der typischen Charakter in der deutschen Oper: Ein Diskussionsbeitrag über die deutsche Nationaloper," *Musik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (1953): 124-31; here 131. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Notably, while Felsenstein's aesthetics had resonances with the principles of socialist realism, he didn't align himself with the socialist cause; he continued to reside in West Berlin and commute to the Komische Oper in the East of the city even after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Regarding his political appropriation in the GDR see Robert Braunmüller, *Oper als Drama: das "realistische Musiktheater" Walter Felsensteins* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002), 58-76.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Felsenstein, *Schriften zum Musiktheater*, ed. Stephan Stompor (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1976), 102.

and insights.”<sup>6</sup> To this end, plots were rendered coherent, their social relevance foregrounded, and the disparate elements of opera reconciled to create the illusion of unity on stage.<sup>7</sup>

The aesthetics of reflection that dominated in the early GDR necessarily privileged a certain type of repertoire. The operas accorded the warmest reception were those whose content was deemed to have rational value for the emerging socialist society. As was the case across the arts, preference was given to works that were judged either to offer a template for the actions needed to achieve a communist utopia or to contain within them an image of the idyllic society that would emerge in the GDR. In this vein, Georg Knepler celebrated *Fidelio* as a call to arms, claiming that at its crux is the message that “that one must be prepared in the struggle against injustice to take up arms,”<sup>8</sup> and heralded the vision for Germany that Wagner set forth in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: “a great figure is at the center; living human beings, who shape their own destiny, are the heroes; [and] and the *Volk* is given an important role as a participant in art and in the destiny of the hero.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Götz Friedrich and Joachim Herz, trans. Amy Stebbin, “Musiktheater – Toward a definition,” *The Opera Quarterly* 27, nos. 2-3 (2011): 299-302; here 300. The article was first published in *Theater der Zeit* in 1960. An insightful discussion of Felsenstein’s realism is provided in Jens Roselt, “Eros und Intellekt: Stanislawski, Felsenstein und die Wahrheit des Theaters,” in *Realistisches Musiktheater. Walter Felsenstein: Geschichte, Erben, Gegenpositionen*, ed. Werner Hintze, Clemens Risi and Robert Sollich (Berlin: Verlag Theater der Zeit, 2008), 18-34. See also Braunmüller, *Oper als Drama*; and Joy H. Calico, “The Legacy of GDR Directors on the Post-Wende Opera Stage,” in *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture*, ed. Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 131-54.

<sup>7</sup> Characteristic in this regard was Felsenstein’s maxim, that that an opera singer communicates through song not “because he has a beautiful voice and has studied singing, but because his dramatic situation compels him to sing.” See Walter Felsenstein and Joachim Herz, *Musiktheater: Beiträge zur Methodik und zu Inszenierungskonzeptionen*, ed. Stephan Stompor (Leipzig: Reclam, 1976), 46.

<sup>8</sup> Georg Knepler, *Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols (Berlin: Henschel, 1961), 1: 475.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:862.

In later decades as the chasm widened between the idyllic world that was “reflected” in socialist art and the decidedly grimmer realities of life under Erich Honecker’s actually existing socialism, straightforward correlations of art and society rang hollow. Intellectuals remained convinced of art’s utopian qualities; they perceived these increasingly, however, in terms of potential rather than reflection and turned to art as a means of illuminating alternatives to the status quo. This required a reconsideration of the socialist canon. Failing to find resonance in works that had been lauded for their adherence to the norms of socialist realism, artists turned towards the mystical and the irrational in search of political meaning. It also resulted in a significant reappraisal of the role of opera. Once championed as a forum for imagining a world that was constructed in the image of the state,<sup>10</sup> it was now reclaimed as a space for exploring parallel realities. As Heiner Müller observed in 1970: “What one cannot yet say, one can perhaps already sing.”<sup>11</sup>

This rethinking of the political function of art can be observed particularly clearly in the reception of *Parsifal* by the East German left. For much of the GDR’s forty-year history, the opera was all but neglected. Reflecting the incongruity of Wagner’s late style with the dynamic aspirations of the infant nation state, *Parsifal* was produced only three times in the 1950s, before disappearing altogether from East German stages for a period of two decades.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the importance that was placed on opera as a national form in the early GDR see Joy H. Calico, “‘Für eine neue deutsche Nationaloper’: Opera in the Discourses of Unification and Legitimation in the German Democratic Republic,” in *Music and German National Identity*, ed. Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 190-204.

<sup>11</sup> Heiner Müller, “Sechs Punkte zur Oper,” *Theater der Zeit* 25, no. 12 (1970): 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> It was performed first at the Deutsche Staatsoper in 1950, when the GDR was in its infancy and its artistic climate relatively liberal. The second performance took place as part of the Richard-Wagner-Festwochen in Dessau in 1955, and finally it was produced by Ernst Kranz in Weimar in 1957. Peter Kupfer provides a useful database of Wagner productions in the GDR at: <http://www.peterkupfer.com/research>.

By the 1970s, however, it had acquired new relevance. Its revival at the Deutsche Staastoper by Harry Kupfer in 1977 heralded a mode of interpretation by East German directors, both at home and abroad, that posited the work as a manifesto for change. Uniting the stagings of figures such as Kupfer, Friedrich, Herz, Ruth Berghaus, Peter Konwitschny, and Uwe Wand was the conviction that Wagner's final work was innately utopian. As the spirit of hope that had dominated in post-war Germany dissipated, the question of what utopia might entail in this context was less than clear. There were few doubts in contrast about what utopia was not. Central to the productions of *Parsifal* that were staged in the period immediately before and after the demise of state socialism in 1989 was the depiction of the grail order as an allegory for the ills of contemporary society.

### **Wagner and Marxist-Leninist Ideology**

The teleological bent of Marxist-Leninist thought determined everything in the early GDR from constructs of history to prescriptions of individual behavior. The socialist society was depicted as being in a state of constant evolution, and its citizens as tireless warriors, whose individual actions would enable the realization of full communism. Key to this narrative was the emphasis that was placed on individual responsibility; a flourishing socialist collective was dependent on each citizen fulfilling his or her potential as a human being, a process that, according to Walter Ulbricht, entailed the:

multi-faceted development of the personality, education in solidarity and collective action, education in love of work, education in military activity, the provision of a high theoretical and artistic general education, the development of all intellectual and

physical capabilities, the formation of the socialist consciousness for the benefit of the *Volk* and the nation.<sup>13</sup>

Models for the idealized “socialist personality” were ubiquitous in East German culture. Characteristic were the positive heroes who populated socialist realist novels and films and achieved socialist enlightenment through the rational overcoming of transformative obstacles.<sup>14</sup> No less significant was the extent to which the militant tropes that were associated with such heroes permeated wider discourse in the state. Redolent of this trend was Ernst Hermann Meyer’s appraisal of sonata form in his seminal treatise on music and socialist realism, *Musik im Zeitgeschehen*, of 1952. Discussing the interplay of the first and second subjects, he asserted that: “Through this dialectical contrast of two opposing themes (often one storming ahead and one reticent), a militant, dramatic element comes into being, which corresponds to the love of combat of the progressive movements of the period.”<sup>15</sup>

*Parsifal* stood at odds with this value-system on a number of levels. The work’s eponymous protagonist is, as George Bernard Shaw observed, no active hero but the creation of a jaded ex-revolutionary. Wagner, Shaw explained:

had given up dreaming of heroes, heroines, and the final solutions, and had conceived a new protagonist in *Parsifal*, whom he announced, not as a hero, but as a fool,

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter Ulbricht, “Der Kampf um den Frieden, für den Sieg des Sozialismus, für die nationale Wiedergeburt Deutschlands als friedliebender demokratischer Staat,” (Berlin 1958). Cited in Verena Zimmerman, *Den neuen Menschen schaffen: Die Umerziehung von schwererziehbaren und straffälligen Jugendlichen in der DDR (1945-1990)* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2004), 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Katerina Clark provides an illuminating overview of this generic model in *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Hermann Meyer, *Musik im Zeitgeschehen* (Berlin: Henschel, 1952), 70.

armed, not with a sword, which cut irresistibly but with a spear which he held only on condition that he did not use it: one who, instead of exulting in the slaughter of a dragon, was ashamed of having shot a swan.<sup>16</sup>

Parsifal neither strives nor overcomes. The shooting of the swan is his one unambiguously free act, after which he loses not only his fighting spirit but also his individual agency. His enlightenment, which is notably one of cosmic rather than rational transformation, is instigated by Kundry, who is herself devoid of free will, and he saves the grail knights not on his own initiative but on behalf of a redeemer. His own contribution to his transformation is self-denial, a fundamentally passive act, which, as Simon Williams asserts, “embodies Schopenhauer’s dictum that all action arising from the need to strive is in vain.”<sup>17</sup>

If Parsifal was no positive hero, the grail knights were an equally poor relation to the idealized socialist collective. The cohesiveness of their elitist community is maintained by irrational beliefs, and the knights are more passive than Parsifal; unable to save themselves, they wait for the latter to stumble upon them and salvage what remains of their ailing society. Teleological progress has no place in Monsalvat; here, as Gurnemanz explains to Parsifal, “time becomes space.” More generally, the trajectory of the opera itself, which at face value is one of restitution rather than evolution, was incongruous with the Marxist march of history. In returning the spear to the grail, Parsifal renews the spirit of the grail community. There is no indication, however, that this will result in any significant developments. As Dieter

---

<sup>16</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung’s Ring* (New York: Dover, 1967), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 136.



Borchmeyer notes, “the only thing that has changed is that the Grail is no longer locked away for good on Amfortas’s instructions.”<sup>18</sup>

The problems with *Parsifal* mapped neatly on to the Marxist-Leninist division of nineteenth-century history into two distinct epochs separated by the 1848 uprisings. While the first part of the century was celebrated for its revolutionary tendencies and the origins of socialist thought located within it, the second part was identified as the precursor to German fascism. According to this narrative, the defeat of democratic ideals in 1848 had rendered the bourgeoisie despondent and increasingly susceptible to the irrational philosophies that had apparently paved the way for the Third Reich.<sup>19</sup> Wagner was easily incorporated into this paradigm. Indeed, in both the Soviet Union and the early GDR he was portrayed as a one-man embodiment of Germany’s revolutionary pinnacle and subsequent downward spiral. His shift from youthful insurgency to a dependency on Ludwig II, his turn to Schopenhauerian pessimism while in exile, and his attempts to create a caesura between his pre-revolutionary romantic operas and late music dramas all served to give credence to the cataclysmic consequences assigned to 1848.<sup>20</sup> As Anatoly Lunacharsky had observed in 1933, Wagner’s

---

<sup>18</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 240.

<sup>19</sup> See Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 203-37.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the reception of Wagner in the early GDR, see Werner P. Seiferth “Wagner-Pflege in der DDR,” *Richard-Wagner-Blätter: Zeitschrift des Aktionskreises für das Werk Richard Wagners* (Bayreuth) 13, no. 3-4 (1989): 89-113; Eckart Kröplin, “Aufhaltsame Ankunft und ahnungsvoller Abschied: Der *Ring* in der DDR,” *wagnerspectrum* 1 (2006): 63-110; and Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic: Narratives of Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 64-95. For an account of Wagner reception in the Soviet Union, see Pauline Fairclough, “Wagner Reception in Stalinist Russia,” in *The Legacy of Richard Wagner: Convergences and Dissonances in Aesthetics and Reception (Sepeculum Musicae)*, ed. Luca Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 309-26.

operas charted “first the rise and development of democracy in Germany and later the downfall of the democratic movement.”<sup>21</sup> By this measure, Wagner’s early romantic works were embraced in the early GDR as expressions of revolutionary optimism; the *Ring* cycle, by virtue of its 1848 conception, as a searing, if flawed, critique of capitalism; and the *Meistersinger* as a happy aberration from Wagner’s post-revolutionary pessimism. In contrast, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* were held up as exemplars of the negative effects of late-nineteenth-century society.

That *Tristan* and *Parsifal* were composed after 1848 was not in itself damning. On the contrary, the second half of the nineteenth century, despite its negative tendencies, was deemed to have produced a body of art that was an important precursor to socialist realism. Balzac, for example, despite his royalist tendencies, was praised by Lukács for the “profound realism” of his novels. By creating representative characters and depicting the conflict between different factions of society, he had constructed “a perfectly balanced picture of the forces locked in struggle.”<sup>22</sup> Where *Tristan* and *Parsifal* were concerned, however, Wagner was deemed to have succumbed to the alienating effects of late capitalism and to have lost all critical perspective in doing so. The resulting artistic response epitomized a construct of late style that was anathema to socialist realism. Old age on Wagner’s part had resulted in the loss of revolutionary ideals and with them the faith in the power of rational thought to prevail. This was perceived musically not just in his recourse to mysticism, but also in the prominence of ambiguities and unresolved contradictions. These fingerprints of late style were ascribed not, as per Adorno, to a temporal incongruity with the *Zeitgeist*; on the

---

<sup>21</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, trans. Avril Pyman and Fainna Glagolev, ed. K.M. Cook (Moscow: Progress, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, introduction by Alfred Kazin (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 28.

contrary, they were cited as evidence of the extent to which Wagner was steeped in late bourgeois ideology. Kurt Bork, head of the Ministry for Culture's Department of Performing Arts, notably observed in 1960 that: "Already in the *Ring*, but especially in *Tristan* and *Parsival* [sic], we find mystical and world-denying traits that have their cause in the hopelessness of the bourgeois people of this time." These traits, he added, "are essentially alien to his music dramas of the pre-revolutionary period, and they also do not appear in the *Meistersinger*, dating from 1867."<sup>23</sup>

### **Rethinking *Parsifal***

The Lukácsian inspired construct of Wagner that dominated in the GDR of the 1950s and early 1960s was by no means the only model of interpretation at this time. Hans Mayer, who was professor of literature in Leipzig from 1948 to 1963, argued vociferously against the neat bifurcation of Wagner's work into two periods. In a series of essays that he penned on the composer in the 1950s, he dismissed the idea of a pre- and post-revolutionary Wagner as pure artifice. There was, he asserted, nothing in the late operas that could not be found in the composer's youthful works. He identified, for example, all of the characters in *Parsifal* as composites of their predecessors. Parsifal, he explained, combines aspects of Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, and Siegfried: like Tannhäuser, he is "caught between heavenly and earthly love"; like Lohengrin, "he strives to escape the blend with earthly sensations"; and like Siegfried, he is a pure fool."<sup>24</sup> He traced comparable lineages between Amfortas, Tannhäuser, and Tristan; Kundry, Venus, and Elizabeth; Klingsor and Alberich; and Gurnemanz and Wotan,

---

<sup>23</sup> Bundesarchiv DR 1/74: Hinweise und Empfehlungen für die Richard-Wagner-Ehrung 1963; document prepared by Deputy Culture Minister Kurt Bork (January 7, 1963), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Mayer, "*Parsifal*, Verklärung und Tod," (1959) in *Richard Wagner: Mitwelt und Nachwelt* (Stuttgart and Zürich: Belser Verlag, 1978), 174.

highlighting in the case of the last pair their shared sense of helplessness. “The knowledge of Gurnemanz,” he argued, “is that of Wotan’s equally hopeless and powerless world knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> In this context, the absence of individual agency in *Parsifal* was far from an aberration. As Mayer observed of its similarities with the *Ring*, Wagner is “alarmingly consistent: the divine alone decides, man serves in every act and error only the preconceived salvation.”<sup>26</sup> Significantly, Mayer viewed *Parsifal* not just as the culmination of a trajectory of despair; he also saw in it the continuing legacy of Wagner’s revolutionary ideals. Writing in 1953, he contended that “it is not even hard to detect Feuerbach’s ideas at crucial points of the *Bühnenweihfestspiel*.”<sup>27</sup>

Even more opposed to the official perspective on Wagner was the interpretation of the composer that was formulated by Ernst Bloch. Bloch, also a professor in Leipzig during the 1950s, saw no continuous trajectories in Wagner’s oeuvre. On the contrary, in *The Spirit of Utopia*, which was published in 1918, he identified a clear distinction between the *Ring* on the one hand and *Tristan* and *Parsifal* on the other. This distinction notably entailed a reversal of the axiom proposed by advocates of socialist realism. Bloch saw little value in art that offered a rational reflection of society. He described the path to utopia as an internal one: the “darkness of the lived moment” prompts a withdrawal inwards, which in turn leads to the revelation of a new “expanse”: “the *world* of the soul, the *external, cosmic* function of utopia, maintained against misery, death, the husk-realm of mere physical nature.”<sup>28</sup> For Bloch, this path was not accessible through the *Ring*. He criticized the cycle’s music for its “vacuity and

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Mayer, “Richard Wagners geistige Entwicklung,” *Sinn und Form* 5, nos. 3-4 (1953): 111-62; here 161.

<sup>28</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.

dismal animality,” and argued that its capacity to invoke the inner consciousness was limited. As he explained:

Any prospect within this work that could lead out of the narrowness of personhood does so only by serving up a world of cardboard, greasepaint, and irredeemable heroic posturing. Feeling, acting human beings become almost entirely painted marionettes, against which the violations, indignities, impersonality and superficial universality and abstraction of this delusion plays itself out.<sup>29</sup>

The irrationalism of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, in contrast, resonated much more with Bloch’s utopian philosophy. *Tristan*, he argued, unlocks our own “inward dreaming [...] we move in a state of yearning and float towards the dream taking shape in the advancing night.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, he explained that the “ontological music in *Parsifal* wants nothing but on that inmost day to guide us into the word ‘soul,’ which is no longer of this world and hardly still of the other, hardly still attached to the ages-old light-pageantry of thrones, dominions, and powers.”<sup>31</sup>

Mayer and Bloch had been largely ignored in the 1950s and both emigrated to the West after the erection of the Berlin Wall. Their perspectives on Wagner became increasingly influential, however, as East German intellectuals rejected the dogma of Marxist-Leninist ideology and began to rethink what a left-wing interpretation of Wagner might entail. Mayer’s fingerprints, for example, are clearly evident in the plea by opera critic Werner Wolf on the occasion of the Wagner’s centenary in 1983 to move beyond the “still doggedly

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 88.

championed theory that Wagner after the revolution of 1848 took a reactionary, assiduously conformist, and subservient course.”<sup>32</sup> Wagner, he argued, had not degenerated “from an 1848 revolutionary to a servant of the king and a turncoat,” but had remained true to his fundamental political convictions until the end of his life.<sup>33</sup> This demanded a reconsideration of *Parsifal*. In a special issue devoted to Wagner of *Musik und Gesellschaft*, the journal of the Composers’ Union, Wolf declared that the composer had with *Parsifal*, “created at the end of his life a work, that through compassion leads to insight and ultimately to a transformation of human society.”<sup>34</sup> This, he argued, represented a continuation of the model that had served Wagner from *Rienzi* onwards. Like its predecessors, *Parsifal* is “a work that after the overcoming of unspeakable suffering provides a vision of a newly emerging human community with true brotherhood.”<sup>35</sup>

While Wolf sought continuities, Harry Kupfer, echoing Bloch, turned the accepted narrative of Wagner on its head. In a 1985 interview he dismissed *Lohengrin* as “Wagner’s most reactionary piece even though it was written before the revolution of 1848,” and argued that *Parsifal*, “which is often misjudged as mystical and backwards looking, is considerably more revolutionary.”<sup>36</sup> His conception of revolution in this context was far removed from the

---

<sup>32</sup> Werner Wolf, “Mit Vereinfachungen brechen,” *Die Union*, Dresden, January 14, 1983. Cited in Marion Benz, “Die Wagner-Inszenierungen von Joachim Herz: Studie zur theatralen Wagner-Rezeption in der DDR,” (PhD diss., Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1998), 51-52.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Werner Wolf, “Richard Wagner: 1813-1883: Zum hundertsten Todestag des Komponisten,” *Musik und Gesellschaft* 33, no. 2 (1983): 65-70; here 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Harry Kupfer in interview with Dieter Kranz, “Erben – aber wie?” Gespräch über Probleme der Klassiker-Interpretation,” (1985) in *Der Regisseur Harry Kupfer. “Ich muß Oper machen.” Kritiken, Beschreibungen, Gespräche*, ed. Dieter Kranz (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1988), 217.

militaristic construct of art that pervaded the official discourse of the GDR. It was also endemic of a wider rejection of what David Bathrick has described as the “‘totality’ thinking at the heart of Marxist-Leninism, where answers are pre-given by the questions asked.”<sup>37</sup> Expanding elsewhere on the appeal of Wagner’s late operas, Kupfer explained: “They put key questions on the agenda. And if the answers are curiously constructed or (what is even more congenial for me) if no answers are provided at all as in *Parsifal*, if the work leaves us with questions as with the *Ring*, this I believe is really great progressive art.”<sup>38</sup>

### Staging Utopia

Key to the reconception of *Parsifal* were the new modes of opera direction that emerged in the GDR during the 1960s and 1970s. Stagings of Wagner’s operas in the 1950s had been largely untouched by socialist performing trends; productions at the Richard-Wagner-Festwochen in Dessau and at the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin were shaped more by the aesthetics of “Neu-Bayreuth” than they were by the innovations of the Komische Oper or Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble.<sup>39</sup> As the first generation of East-German trained directors came of age, however, the influence of Felsenstein and Brecht became increasingly palpable. While Friedrich, Herz and Kupfer brought to Wagner a combination of Felsenstein’s realism and

---

<sup>37</sup> David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 159.

<sup>38</sup> Kranz and Kupfer, “Gespräch über Richard Wagner zum 100. Todestag der Komponisten,” *Sonntag*, February 6, 1983; reprinted in Kranz, *Der Regisseur Harry Kupfer*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> See Seiferth, “Wagner Pflege in der DDR,” 99; and Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic*, 71-74. Wagner’s operas were notably absent from the Komische Oper until 1962, when Felsenstein invited Herz to direct *Der fliegende Holländer*.

elements of Brecht's alienation techniques, Berghaus subjected him to a post-Brechtian deconstruction.<sup>40</sup>

Of particular significance for Wagner reception was the tendency of both Felsenstein and Brecht to treat works from the classical heritage as living entities rather than museum pieces. Felsenstein's commitment to uncovering composers' intentions did not necessitate a blind adherence to the text. As Herz observes, "Felsenstein was in favor of a theater that is intrinsically coherent. And if it isn't coherent, then it is made coherent."<sup>41</sup> Thus, for example, Felsenstein in his 1951 production of *Der Freischütz* reinstated the cuts that Weber had made to Friedrich Kind's libretto in order to foreground the work's status as a commentary on the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War.<sup>42</sup> Brecht, meanwhile, viewed an overly reverential treatment of the literary canon as a severe impediment to its survival, and in his adaptations of classical works he liberally cut, altered, and added parallel scenes into the original texts, with the aim of distancing audiences from that which had become overly familiar.<sup>43</sup> The new

---

<sup>40</sup> Friedrich and Herz served apprenticeships with Felsenstein at the Komische Oper. Kupfer, who studied at the Leipziger Theaterhochschule considered himself equally indebted to Felsenstein and Brecht; see Kupfer, "Ideen – Gedanken – Meinungen," in *Harry Kupfer – Musiktheater*, ed. Hans-Jochen Genzel and Eberhard Schmidt (Berlin, 1997), 109. Berghaus meanwhile was influenced primarily by Brecht and served as director of his Berliner Ensemble from 1971-77.

<sup>41</sup> Joachim Herz, "'Einer von den kleinen Felsensteinen ...': Vom Erben, vom Weiterreichen und vom Vergessen," in *Realistisches Musiktheater. Walter Felsenstein: Geschichte, Erben, Gegenpositionen*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> See "Materialien zu Walter Felsensteins Inszenierung *Der Freischütz* von Carl Maria von Weber an der Komischen Oper Berlin 1955," in Heide Hess and Peter Liebers, eds., *Arbeiten mit der Romantik heute*, Arbeitsheft der Akademie der Künste 26 (Berlin: Akademie der Künste der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1978), 81–84.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Margot Heinemann, "How Brecht read Shakespeare," in *Political Shakespeare: Essays on Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup>



wave of East German opera directors were rather more circumspect in their approach to the canon than that advocated by Brecht. Nevertheless his fingerprints were tangible in their rejection of the sanctity of the text, a rejection that was particularly conducive to the growing conviction in the GDR that Wagner's bourgeois environment had restricted his capacity to realize the latent utopian potential of his operas. Characteristic was the assertion in 1983 by the critic Dieter Kranz that: "Wagner could have no perspective on his heroes [...]. The redemption that is provided to them can never be a solution."<sup>44</sup> As a consequence, Kranz underscored the need for significant directorial intervention on stage. "Whoever brings Wagner's music dramas to the stage," he declared, "faces the challenge of making the utopian or illusory, the unresolved or unreal, in any case the contradictory nature of this [*Parsifal's*] finale, visually manifest."<sup>45</sup>

One of the earliest directors to take on this challenge was Joachim Herz, who brought a Blochian perspective to bear on a number of Wagner's operas by re-envisioning their endings to offer utopian conclusions. Particularly striking in this regard were his productions of *Der fliegende Holländer* and the *Ring*, both of which he set in the historical context of Wagner's nineteenth-century Germany. His interpretation of *Der fliegende Holländer*, which he turned into a film for the East German company DEFA in 1964,<sup>46</sup> culminates with the

---

edn, 1994), 226-54. On the need for historical distance, see Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 190.

<sup>44</sup> Dieter Kranz, "Wagner-Schlüsse: Das Beispiel *Parsifal*/ Finallösungen bei Harry Kupfer," *Theater der Zeit* 38, no. 3 (1983): 12-15; here 12.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> After first directing the opera at the Komische Oper in 1962, Herz subsequently took the production to Moscow in 1963. The film was released on DVD by Icestorm in 2013: *Der fliegende Holländer*, dir. Herz, 98 min., B&W (4028951197668). A version by the DEFA library at UMass Amherst with additional materials that include interviews with Herz was also released in 2013.

liberation of Senta from her bourgeois constraints. Instead of jumping into the sea in the final act, she is inspired by her encounters with the Dutchman, who in Herz's film is a figment of her imagination, to leave behind her claustrophobic life. The inner world of her dreams has illuminated new possibilities and the film ends with her walking along a beach into the sunshine. Similar promises of a new dawn marked the conclusion of Herz's *Ring* cycle, which he staged in Leipzig between 1973 and 1976. The final moments of *Götterdämmerung* saw members of the chorus mill on stage in their own clothes and watch as the embers of Valhalla were replaced with a plain white curtain.<sup>47</sup> Herz later explained: "the end therefore not an end, but instead: tabula rasa, open for a new beginning heralded by the violins – so that the new world might be better than the old. The principle of hope."<sup>48</sup>

Herz's faith in the possibility of new beginnings from less than auspicious circumstances had echoes of the reform socialism that was advocated in the 1970s and 1980s by East German dissidents. Arguing in favor of a "third way" to state socialism and western capitalism, figures such as Rudolf Bahro and Robert Havemann called for a more tolerant form of socialist governance that would have at its core individual experience rather than the

---

<sup>47</sup> No recording was made of the production, but a detailed description is provided in Marion Reinisch and Eginhard Rohlig, eds, *Joachim Herz inszeniert Richard Wagners Ring des Nibelungen am Opernhaus Leipzig*. Arbeitshefte der Akademie der Künste, vols 21 and 29 (Berlin: Akademie der Künste der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1975 and 1980). Insightful accounts are also provided in Marion Benz, "Die Wagner-Inszenierungen von Joachim Herz," 230–86; and Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale, 2006), 331–43.

<sup>48</sup> Joachim Herz, "Unsere Leipziger Annäherung an Richard Wagner 1960–1990," *Wagner weltweit*. Die Zeitschrift des Richard Wagner Verband International e.V. 44 (September 2005), 44.

preservation of the regime.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to other Soviet Bloc states, artists did not play a prominent role in the GDR's opposition movements. As Havemann lamented in 1978:

Until the famous declaration protesting Biermann's expatriation, not a single one of the GDR's bourgeois intellectuals had expressed openly and publicly their support for Biermann or for our position, or indeed, for an unambiguous critique of SED policies. All these people, many of them very likeable, intelligent, and with great artistic talents, would not risk sticking their necks out like Wolf, or appearing next to him, because they feared being denied the freedom to do their work.<sup>50</sup>

That said, within the boundaries of, what Jarausch has described as a "controlled public sphere," which was for the most part reluctantly tolerated by the SED, art did serve as an important forum for critical reflection.<sup>51</sup> It offered a space for deconstructing socialist norms, for exposing the dichotomies that had emerged between the rhetoric of socialist realism and the realities of life under "actually existing socialism," and for imagining alternative models

---

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Bahro's *Die Alternative. Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus* (*The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, 1977). For more on reform socialism, see Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989: Social Movements in a Leninist Regime* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), and John C. Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Robert Havemann, *Ein deutscher Kommunist: Rückblicke und Perspektiven aus der Isolation*, ed. Manfred Wilke (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1978), 23. Translated in Torpey, *Intellectuals, Socialism and Dissent*, 242n1. The expatriation of the singer Wolf Biermann by the SED in November 1976 prompted the first public protest by intellectuals in the GDR's history.

<sup>51</sup> Konrad Jarausch, "The Double Disappointment: Revolution, Unification, and German Intellectuals," in *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Michael Geyer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 280.

both to the SED-governed GDR and to modern society more generally. This phenomenon was apparent in the productions both of directors such as Herz, Kupfer, and Berghaus who enjoyed a privileged position in the GDR, and Friedrich, who emigrated on professional grounds to the Federal Republic in 1972 and continued to imbue his work with utopian currents.

A particularly tangible manifestation of the prominence of utopian thinking in East German art can be observed in the rise of feminist perspectives, which served as the inverse to the masculine aesthetics of socialist realism. As John Griffith Urang remarks of this trend in literature: “In confronting the persistence of patriarchal domination within ‘actually existing socialism,’ East German feminist texts reached for the language of radical difference, a language foreclosed by socialist ideology’s very definition of the human.”<sup>52</sup> Characteristic was Christa Wolf’s novel *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (No Place on Earth, 1979), which offered the humane intellectualism of an imagined encounter between the writers Karolina von Günderrode and Heinrich von Kleist as an alternative to the philistine society of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and, by implication, the GDR.<sup>53</sup>

The opposition in Wolf’s novel between the positive feminine sphere of Günderrode and Kleist – she describes the latter as “not wholly a man”<sup>54</sup> – and the masculine world from which they find themselves excluded, found a parallel in the utopian readings of *Parsifal* that emerged during the same period. At the crux of the productions by Kupfer at the Staatsoper

---

<sup>52</sup> John Griffith Urang, *Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 133-34.

<sup>53</sup> Darmstadt/Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1979. Translated into English as *No Place on Earth* by Jan van Heurck (London: Virago, 1983). Regarding the analogies in the novel to the political climate of the GDR, see Anna K. Kuhn, *Christa Wolf’s Utopian Vision: From Marxism to Feminism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 138-77.

<sup>54</sup> Wolf, *No Place on Earth*, 94.

in 1977 and again in Copenhagen later that same year, Friedrich in Stuttgart (1976) and Bayreuth (1982), Uwe Wand in Leipzig in 1982, and Herz with the English National Opera in 1986, was the conviction that the grail order in eliminating femininity from its midst had divested itself of all humanity.<sup>55</sup> Parsifal's passive nature was no longer cause for concern in this context. On the contrary, his potential as redeemer was located in his status as the antithesis both to the grail knights and, indeed, to the wider militarized society of the Cold War. If the restitution of the grail community as Wagner envisaged it in his libretto did not resonate with East German directors, the work's pacifist tendencies did.

This was reflected in the widespread portrayal of the grail order as a community that was either entirely decimated or devoid of meaning. While broken pillars littered the stage in the first act of Herz's production,<sup>56</sup> the mise-en-scène of Friedrich's Bayreuth staging, which was designed by fellow East German émigré Andreas Reinhardt, consisted of a tower lying on its side with its ceiling facing towards the audience and one of its walls serving as the platform on which the action played out. These scenes of disorder suggested the corruption that had set in among the knights. Friedrich's knights were completely lacking in empathy towards Amfortas's plight; they manhandled him to uncover the grail as he struggled under the weight of a large crucifix that symbolized the burden of a fossilized belief system. In Herz's staging, meanwhile, the knights went through the motions of rituals that had long lost their ceremonial importance. In a review of the production for *The Observer*, Peter Heyworth

---

<sup>55</sup> Katherine R. Syer provides a comprehensive summary of post-war *Parsifal* productions in "Parsifal on Stage," in *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, ed. William Kindermann and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 277-338.

<sup>56</sup> See Barry Millington, "Saucepans of Spaghetti: A Semiology of Opera Criticism," *The Musical Times* 127, no. 1719 (1986): 333-35; here 333.

described how: “carpets are unfolded, chairs brought in, as though a works meeting had been called in the office canteen.”<sup>57</sup>

The ability of such stagings to transcend the specific circumstances of the GDR was redolent of the increasingly warm reception that was accorded in the West to socialist art in the wake of 1968. Within the realm of opera, East German innovations were seized upon as a means of liberating the art form from its elitist bourgeois conventions. While Wolfgang Wagner turned to the realism of Kupfer and Friedrich as an antidote to the symbolic mysticism that had been introduced to Bayreuth by Wieland Wagner,<sup>58</sup> Berghaus’s absurdist post-Brechtian approach chimed with the unsentimental Adornian aesthetics of Michael Gielen’s team at Oper Frankfurt. More broadly, the preoccupations in East German art with ossified social structures, with the problems inherent in industrialized and militarized societies, and with themes of alienation had resonances beyond the GDR. Such concerns reflected not only the condition of late socialism but also that of late modernity. As David Robinson observes of the popularity in the Federal Republic of Christoph Hein’s novel *Der fremde Freund* (*The Distant Lover*, 1982), this “resulted not from any West German taste for GDR-exotica, but from shocked recognition of the book’s depiction of alienated life in a modern urban-industrial society.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Peter Heyworth, “A Tale of Two Missed Chances,” *The Observer*, March 23, 1986, 23.

<sup>58</sup> The marked East German presence in Bayreuth in the 1970s and 1980s, which included Friedrich’s productions of *Tannhäuser* (1972), *Lohengrin* (1979), and *Parsifal*, and Kupfer’s productions of *Der fliegende Holländer* (1978) and *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1988), caused significant consternation among the festival’s right-wing supporters; the premiere of Friedrich’s *Tannhäuser*, for instance, prompted a walk-out by the chair of the Christian Social Union Party, Franz Josef Strauss. See Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 346-47.

<sup>59</sup> David W. Robinson, “Christoph Hein between ideologies, or, where do the knights of the round table go after Camelot falls?” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 4, no. 2 (1995): 79-85; here 84.

The capacity of East German art to allow for multiple readings can be observed particularly clearly in Kupfer's 1977 production of *Parsifal*. Its dual status as an allegory for the GDR regime and a commentary on the decline of Western society facilitated its reception both at home and abroad. At the crux of Kupfer's staging was the significance that he placed on the grail knights' empty rituals. He viewed the opera in terms of the damage that an excessive adherence to dogma can wreak on society, explaining that:

The seeds of the destruction lie in the system of the order itself. From its beginnings in existent elitist attitudes – the grail knights were the chosen ones – grew intolerance and arrogance [...]. The original concept of purity turned into an insistence on celibacy, and precisely this dogma rendered the order susceptible to lies, dishonesty, and hypocrisy.<sup>60</sup>

Accordingly, Kupfer's knights were far past the point of redemption. Theirs was a sterile society that was dominated by cruelty and aggression, and the religious ceremonies that had once held meaning had now degenerated into kitsch, serving only to mark the rigid social divisions that had evolved in the order. The grail temple was dominated by a towering crucifix, while the knights were garbed in full clerical regalia and segregated into hierarchical groups according to the ornateness of their vestments. The resulting impression was described by one East German reviewer as "a veritable parade like at a Vatican Council."<sup>61</sup> Yet the fetishization in the production of religious paraphernalia was not just reminiscent of Western religious institutions; it also recalled the status accorded to rituals and costumes by

---

<sup>60</sup> Walter Rösler, "Parsifal redivivus: Gespräch mit Harry Kupfer," *Theater der Zeit* 32, no. 10 (1977): 49-51; here 50.

<sup>61</sup> Manfred Schubert, "Musikalisch glänzende *Parsifal*-Aufführung," *Berliner Zeitung*, July 16, 1977, 4.

officials in the GDR. A striking parallel can be drawn in this context with Hein's play *Die Ritter der Tafelrunde* (The Knights of the Round Table), which premiered in Dresden in April 1989. Hein's aging grail community, which was interpreted in both East and West as loosely a veiled proxy for the Honecker regime,<sup>62</sup> cling blindly to a stagnant set of values and ceremonial practices as their society collapses around them. They persist in claiming mystical powers for their round table; yet as a young and skeptical Morold counters, "It's wood, old man... No mystical-metaphysical aspects seem to be in evidence."<sup>63</sup>

Particularly provocative in Kupfer's staging were the allusions to Germany's history of dictatorship, which echoed Adorno's description of the grail community as a "glorified blood-brotherhood," and a "prototype of the sworn confraternities of the secret societies and Führer-orders of later years."<sup>64</sup> The entrance to the temple in Peter Sykora's stage design was flanked by the busts of two giant-sized angels of vengeance with flaming swords, whose hyper-muscular physique recalled the nude male sculptures of Arno Breker in Third Reich. Described variously in the East German press as "beefed-up, militant angels,"<sup>65</sup> and "monstrous archangels,"<sup>66</sup> these figures emphasized the extent to which the grail rituals had lost their meaning and the knights their original charitable intent. Crucially, this portrayal

---

<sup>62</sup> The play was viewed in a dim light by government officials and its premiere subject to significant government-imposed delays. See Philip S. McKnight, *Understanding Christoph Hein* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 155-58. Regarding its reception, see Robinson, "Christoph Hein between ideologies," 82-84.

<sup>63</sup> Christoph Hein, trans. David W. Robinson, "The Knights of the Round Table," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 4, no. 2 (1995): 87-123; here 99.

<sup>64</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), 129.

<sup>65</sup> Schubert, "Musikalisch glänzende *Parsifal*-Aufführung."

<sup>66</sup> Eckart Schwinger, "Mythos musikalisch vermenschlicht: Harry Kupfer inszenierte in der Staatsoper *Parsifal*," *Neue Zeit*, July 19, 1977, 4.



obliterated any simplistic oppositions of good and evil between the knights and Klingsor. Klingsor's world, Kupfer argued, had been brought into being by the grail community and was created in its image. "It gives shape to that which it is forbidden to think and to experience in the grail world but exists latently under the surface."<sup>67</sup> The consequences of both systems were "destructive and inhumane."<sup>68</sup>

Salvation in these productions lay in restoring to the grail community the femininity it had excluded, and each concluded by indicating a future in which the humanizing influence of women would play a significant role. In Herz's staging, for example, Kundry did not die but instead helped to uncover the grail at the end and was joined on stage by women from the chorus. Friedrich, who had allowed Kundry to survive in his 1976 production, followed Wagner's libretto in this regard in Bayreuth. Nevertheless, Kundry's death, far from expunging the last vestiges of femininity from the grail, served as a catalyst for a new social order to emerge. As Katherine Syer describes, "the back wall of the set opened out, allowing the flower maidens to join the knights onstage in a flood of natural light."<sup>69</sup> The positive implications of this new incarnation of the grail order were articulated particularly clearly in the reaction of the knights to Parsifal. They demonstrated their acceptance of him as their new leader by laying aside their helmets and swords.<sup>70</sup>

Neither Kupfer nor Uwe Wand in his Leipzig production saw the possibility for change in the grail order. They did, however, locate within the opera a message of hope. Kupfer first mooted the prospect of redemption in the Good Friday Magic scene, where he had a blanket of snow give way to a meadow and the dead branches of the forest come alive

---

<sup>67</sup> Rösler, "*Parsifal* redivivus," 50.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Katherine R. Syer, "*Parsifal* on Stage," 320.

<sup>70</sup> See Kranz, "Wagner-Schlüsse," 13.

with blossoms.<sup>71</sup> Yet Parsifal's return to Monsalvat did not bring with it a revitalization of the grail community. Kupfer conceived of Parsifal as the polar opposite to the militant grail knights. He was, he asserted, an "utterly 'unGerman' anti-imperialistic hero." He wants "to convert the world not with fire and sword"; instead, he tries to effect change with the "weapons of the spirit."<sup>72</sup> Renewal in this context involved a complete overthrow of the old patriarchal order. In the final scene of the opera, Parsifal defended Amfortas from attack by his fellow knights and granted him his wish to die. He then picked up the grail chalice and left the temple, taking Kundry, Gurnemanz, and a few outlying knights with him. Of this ending, Kupfer remarked: "Whoever wants to follow [Parsifal] can follow him. It is the setting of a new beginning. Nothing is as before, but a door is thrown open for the order to the world, to the people."<sup>73</sup> This rejection of the status quo was echoed five years later by Wand. Here Parsifal's act of redemption involved the sacrifice of his own life, which freed Kundry and Amfortas to leave the grail and start anew. As with Kupfer, Wand saw this deviation from the text in terms of a realization of the opera's utopian potential. He explained, with a nod to Bloch and the progressive lineage associated with him: "The principle of hope receives a fresh chance against all the Schopenhauerian speculation of resignation and renunciation."<sup>74</sup>

### **The Death of Utopia: *Parsifal* before and after the *Wende***

---

<sup>71</sup> Kranz, "Bühnenweihfestspiel wird subtiles, vitales Theaterstück: *Parsifal*, Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, 10. August 1977." Broadcast on Berliner Rundfunk, "Atelier und Bühne," 17.7.1977. Published in *Der Regisseur Harry Kupfer*, 136.

<sup>72</sup> Rösler, "*Parsifal* redivivus," 49.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Kranz, "Wagner-Schlüsse," 14.

Standing apart from the optimism that dominated interpretations of *Parsifal* in the 1970s and 1980s was the centennial staging of the opera in Frankfurt that was directed by Berghaus and conducted by Michael Gielen. This production marked a return of sorts to the 1950s interpretation of the work as the pessimistic expression of an ex-revolutionary no longer able to envisage a better society. Gielen claimed to perceive this absence of hope in the score. Observing the return of the music from the first act in the third act, he declared that “Wagner made no attempt to find music for what the future holds.”<sup>75</sup> Crucially, while such a reading of the opera had been incompatible with the bright-eyed idealism of the 1950s, by the 1980s it was in tune with the *Zeitgeist*. Wagner’s failure to offer a clear alternative to the grail order resonated all too strongly in a post-1968 world where alternatives to late capitalism and state socialism seemed ever more unlikely.

The Frankfurt *Parsifal* evinced a grail community in terminal decline.<sup>76</sup> Berghaus’s knights resembled the half-dead of an apocalyptic horror movie. Eyes blackened, heads shaved, and dressed in long black coats with yellow inner lining, they moved listlessly about the stage. Some walked in a hunched and halting manner, others crawled, and one or two simply dropped dead, unnoticed by those around them. Despite their uniform appearance, this was clearly a society from which community spirit had long since dissipated. The characters made no attempt to address or even acknowledge each other, each blind to all but his own

---

<sup>75</sup> “*Parsifal*: A Workshop Conversation with Ruth Berghaus, Michael Gielen, Klaus Zehelein, and Axel Manthey,” *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2006): 349-60; here, 353.

<sup>76</sup> A video of the dress rehearsal of the production is held in the Ruth Berghaus Archiv in the Stiftung-Archiv der Akademie der Künste (hereafter SA-AdK). I am grateful to Maxim Dessau for granting me permission to access the video, and to Konstanze Mach-Meyerhofer for facilitating this access. The discussion here is drawn from a longer commentary on the staging in *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic, 197-99*. Thoughtful accounts of the production are also provided in Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 138-43; and Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 367-68.

individual existence. Their processions were chaotic, and the ritual of the grail – a circle that lit up red when uncovered – was anything but a communal affair; the knights sated themselves from the contents of the suitcases that they carried with them. As one critic remarked, Berghaus's brotherhood was a "mute troop of loners."<sup>77</sup> Long gone were any remnants of humanity or compassion. Amfortas, who was bandaged like a mummy, was treated like a rag-doll, and forcibly propped up by the knights against the cliff face so that he could perform his duties for their benefit.

The stagnation that had taken hold was given a physical manifestation in Alex Manthey's oppressive set design. A large cliff face dominated the stage, forcing the action to unfold in a cramped space at the front. Berghaus explained that:

The narrowness or the oppressiveness of this space, named the Grail temple, is intentional, for the knights have arrived at the point where inflexibility sets in, where the ritual can only take place when the father, Titurel, lying in his grave, gives the sign that the Grail should be opened. [...] We are shown a rigidity, the point at which a society begins to decline.<sup>78</sup>

Parsifal, who was more innocent child than heroic redeemer, even after his second-act encounter with Kundry, had little chance of stemming this downward spiral, and the closing scenes of the production were bleak. With the knights having breathed their last after the final uncovering of the grail, Parsifal stood alone in the red ring and shivered as he took on his new role as leader of a community that had long since disintegrated.

---

<sup>77</sup> Rainer Wagner, "Ritual der Regenmäntel: Der Frankfurter *Parsifal* von Ruth Berghaus," *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 3, 1983.

<sup>78</sup> "Parsifal: A Workshop Conversation," 355.

Berghaus's dystopian reading of Wagner's paean to redemption was to prove prescient for the reception of *Parsifal* in the final decades of the twentieth century. The bleak worldview that was encoded in her production preempted that of East German directors in the 1990s. The euphoria that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 was short-lived. While left-wing intellectuals acknowledged the failure of the Marxist-Leninist project, its demise also signaled the end of their socialist vision. Hans Mayer, for example, wrote in 1991 that "the GDR was a utopia," and concluded that a "German possibility went to ruin here."<sup>79</sup> Heiner Müller similarly described the decline of the state as a trajectory from a *Traum* (dream) to an *Alptraum* (nightmare).<sup>80</sup> Where once the utopian dreaming of socialist intellectuals had contained within it the hope that an idyllic world was achievable, they were resigned now to a definition of utopia that drew on the term's *ou topos* or "no place" etymology. Marxism had been unable to respond to the problems of late modernity. Yet the free capitalism of the West offered no more compelling solutions. Revealing is Gerd Rienäcker's recollection of a conversation with Götz Friedrich in 1991 in which the latter apparently advised: "Don't believe that you are coming into a better system."<sup>81</sup>

For East German theater directors, the *Wende* brought with it mixed fortunes. Like other high-ranking intellectuals, they had enjoyed extensive privileges in the GDR. Whatever obstacles they faced were offset by excellent remuneration and considerable freedom, including the much coveted status of *Reisekader* (travel cadre), which enabled them to work

---

<sup>79</sup> Hans Mayer, *Der Turm von Babel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 258. Translated in Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989*, 210.

<sup>80</sup> Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1992), 363. See Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution*, 209-10, for more discussion of this perspective.

<sup>81</sup> Gerd Rienäcker, "Begegnungen mit Felsensteins Theater," in *Realistisches Musiktheater. Walter Felsenstein: Geschichte, Erben, Gegenpositionen*, 36.

on both sides of the Iron Curtain.<sup>82</sup> This position had also, however, resulted in a profound sense of dislocation. Increasingly out of touch with their less-privileged compatriots at home, yet unwilling to reject socialism permanently in favor of what the West had to offer, they occupied a no-man's land between the two. As Müller remarked in 1982: "I like to stand with one leg on each side of the wall. Maybe this is a schizophrenic position, but none other seems to me real enough."<sup>83</sup> On a professional level, the fall of the Wall affected individual directors differently. While Berghaus lost her contract at East Berlin's Deutsche Staatsoper, Kupfer remained at the helm of the Komische Oper, and Konwitschny, who was somewhat younger and less entrenched in the GDR system, emerged as a rising star in the West. Uniting them all, however, was a continued commitment to aesthetics of performance that were deeply rooted in the GDR,<sup>84</sup> and a legacy of dislocation and disillusionment that corresponded not only to the failure of the socialist project but also to the pervasive sense of loss that was experienced by both East and West Germans in the years following unification.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Corinne Holtz provides a compelling account of both the privileges and tensions faced by such figures in her biography of Ruth Berghaus. See Holtz, *Ruth Berghaus. Ein Porträt* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Heiner Müller in interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "The Walls of History," in *The German Issue*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 1982), 50.

<sup>84</sup> Konwitschny, for example, claims that the fall of the Wall resulted in no corresponding shift in his style of direction. See Jürgen Otto, "Ein Gespräch mit dem Opernregisseur Peter Konwitschny: Es ist Hoffnung, das Ende ist nun doch wohl gekommen," *Berliner Zeitung*, June 28, 1997. <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/archiv/ein-gespraech-mit-dem-opernregisseur-peter-konwitschny-es-ist-hoffnung--das-ende-ist-nun-doch-wohl-gekommen,10810590,9298386.html> (accessed July 16, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> Michael Geyer notably describes Hannah Arendt's concept of *Weltverlust*, or loss of world, as "the dominant experience of the nineties" in Germany. See Geyer, Introduction to *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, 4.

Kupfer captured this despondency in an interview that was published in the program book for his 1992 production of *Parsifal* at the Deutsche Staatsoper. Casting his decision to replace his 1977 staging, which had remained in the company's repertoire until 1991, as a response to a new world order, he asserted: "The Grail knighthoods of that time have since resigned, and we struggle with the consequences. What remains is the knowledge that a small self-proclaimed 'elite' are not in the position to change the world, to bring 'order'."<sup>86</sup> This knowledge had not, to Kupfer's mind, brought with it any profound insights, and he offered a dispiriting interpretation of the significance of the grail in post-unification Germany:

The grail order is for me today the sum of all ideologies and also all politics that propagate corruption under the pretext of a more ethical, fairer, freer order. We live today with new, previously unimaginable consequences. We experience more painfully than in 1977 a world that is divided in a different way and with it a divided humanity.

Instead of alleviating the alienation of the individual, freedom had simply intensified this process. "We become ever more free," Kupfer concluded, "and we destroy the human totality ever more."<sup>87</sup> His production manifested the universality of this alienation through the timelessness of Hans Schavernoch's futuristic set design, which was characterized by cold metallic surfaces. Monsalvat resembled a space-age vault, while the portrayal of the flower

---

<sup>86</sup> Manfred Haendler, "*Parsifal* 1977 und heute: Aus einem Gespräch mit dem Regisseur Harry Kupfer," in the Program Book for the 1992 production at the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin, 96. The program book is included in the production documents that are held for the staging. See SA-AdK Inszenierungsdokumente 921. A DVD of Kupfer's production, which was conducted by Daniel Barenboim, was released by EuroArts in 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 97.

maidens, who were reduced to isolated body parts on television screens, offered a very literal allegory for the disjunction of body and soul in industrialized society.

Peter Konwitschny offered a similar indictment of the contemporary western world in his production of *Parsifal* at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich in 1995.<sup>88</sup> He too saw elements of the GDR's doomed regime in the grail knights. In the first preparatory discussion for the production with set designer Johannes Leiacker and dramaturg Werner Hintze, he compared Gurnemanz to "an old communist who is friendly with the leaders of the actually-existing socialism and was their fellow soldier, but now sees how everything for which he fought is going astray."<sup>89</sup> Like Kupfer, however, he viewed the relevance of the knights' predicament to extend far beyond the GDR. The negative ramifications of their purely male society, he argued, were applicable in equal order to "the Catholic church, the Politburo, or the American government."<sup>90</sup> Uniting all of these institutions was the extent to which they had rejected the humanizing tendencies of nature in favor of progress and civilization, a perspective that reflected the German legacy of the *Zivilisationskritik*, which had dominated discourses of reform socialism in the late GDR.<sup>91</sup> Konwitschny and his team teased out this analogy in their conception for the production. The grail order, they asserted, is based on a

---

<sup>88</sup> The production, which was originally conducted by Kent Nagano, is still in the company's repertoire.

<sup>89</sup> SA-AdK Inszenierungsdokumente 840a: Protokolle der Konzeptionsgespräche. Erste Sitzung vom 21.-24. April 1994 – Peter Konwitschny, Johannes Leiacker und Werner Hintze, 2.

<sup>90</sup> Wolf Schreiber, "Der Gral als Symbol für den Schoß der Frau. Ein doppeltes Debut: Wie Regisseur Peter Konwitschny Richard Wagners *Parsifal* versteht," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 30, 1995.

<sup>91</sup> See Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989*, 210-11. A similar preoccupation with the negative effects of civilization notably pervades Hein's *Die Ritter der Tafelrunde*. Here, in a lament for the impending destruction of the earth's forests, Guenevere remarks that: "when the forests die out, so will the people. We can't outlive nature, because we are part of nature. We'll die." See Hein, "The Knights of the Round Table," 106.



“false axiom”: “The conceptual world of the knights is a constructed one. They cut themselves off from naturally occurring relationships, because they privilege a life without the female element, and therefore violate nature.”<sup>92</sup> They channel their suppressed urges into civilizing processes, which are analogous to contemporary phenomena such as “missile research, the straightening of rivers, and the cementing over of front gardens.”<sup>93</sup> This results in a society where “nature is not only destroyed, but man is also alienated from himself.”<sup>94</sup>

This self-inflicted alienation was manifest in the staging itself in the claustrophobic quarters to which the grail knights had voluntarily confined themselves in their bid to separate mind from body. Their temple was an underground bunker from which nature and all of its temptations were shut out. That this existence was untenable was made clear in Konwitschny’s depiction of the grail, which embodied precisely that which the knights were determined to reject. In order to uncover it, Amfortas climbed a ladder out of the bunker and opened a panel in the tree above to reveal a grotto containing Kundry, who was dressed like the Virgin Mary with flower children at her sides. The destruction of nature meanwhile was given a symbolic representation in the tree that featured in all three acts of the opera. In the first act, it was center stage and constructed from white paper, a metaphor for “our civilizing progress, for our high culture.”<sup>95</sup> It dominated the stage similarly in the second act but disappeared when Parsifal repelled Kundry, and in the third act it returned only as a shadow of itself; its negative image could be observed in the space between the two white walls that hung on either side of the stage. Synonymous with the life force of the knights, the fate of the tree charted the increasing purification of the grail order.

---

<sup>92</sup> SA-AdK Inszenierungsdokumente 840a: Konzeption, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 40.

Crucially, as the fate of the tree made clear, the entry of Parsifal into grail world spelled not redemption but the end of nature and with it the end of the grail community. As Konwitschny argued, “Parsifal is not the blonde Aryan savior: he is dangerous. If he can do what Amfortas cannot, namely to kill off the sexuality and sensations within himself, then the countdown has started for us all.”<sup>96</sup> Parsifal’s innocence in the first act was reflected in the openness of his natural urges. Uncorrupted by the social mores of the knights, he fell in love with Kundry at first sight, fashioning a heart for her from a piece of red paper. Kundry’s spell, however, was to prove far less powerful than the influence of the grail order, and Parsifal’s rejection of her in the second act was portrayed not as an instinctive repulsion but as the manifestation of his succumbing to the lure of civilization. In order to assume the role of king, Parsifal transcended his basic human character, and in doing so obliterated the nature that was essential to the grail order’s survival. This process was rendered complete by the death of Kundry, which as the production team asserted in their conception, was far removed from any ideals of redemption. With her demise, the final contradictions in the world of the knights had been eradicated and with them any vestiges of meaning in life: “K is dead, the contradiction, the tension eliminated and with it also life, because all femininity, also the anima in us men, is dead: A catastrophe!”<sup>97</sup> Once again, the catastrophic destruction of nature was symbolized on stage through the use of paper. The live dove that had accompanied Kundry in the grail scene of the first act was reduced in act three to a drawing on a white sheet of paper that was used to cover her corpse.

Kupfer retained the basic premise of his earlier production in his 1992 staging. He ended the opera once again with Parsifal, Kundry and Gurnemanz leaving behind a hopeless

---

<sup>96</sup> Beate Kayser, “tz-Gespräch mit Peter Konwitschny zu seiner Wagner-Inszenierung zur Festspieleröffnung im Nationaltheater,” *tz*, June 29, 1995.

<sup>97</sup> *Konzeption*, 24.

grail order. Given, however, the universality now ascribed to the problems beleaguering the order, the path to utopia was less certain than it had been before. For Konwitschny, even this faint glimmer of optimism had been extinguished. Telling is the observation in the production book created to document the staging that: “Wagner demonstrates that the world is bad, that infinite amounts of effort and responsibility would accompany a better one. But a better world is utopia. Not achievable.”<sup>98</sup> At the close of the twentieth century, art had regained its reflective function. Now, however, all faith in its capacity for reform had evaporated. Its role was reduced to illustrating where modern industrial society had gone irrevocably astray.

## Conclusion

The draw of *Parsifal* for East German directors reflects the role that the timeliness of an artwork plays in its reception. It is also revealing of the significant shift that occurred in Marxist aesthetics in the late twentieth century. Key to the rejection of *Parsifal* in the early GDR was the centrality that was placed on the artist in socialist realist thought. That which was valued most highly – art that offered a positive reflection of society – was predicated specifically on the artist having an appropriate worldview. As Lukács’s theory of reflection lost its hold in later years, so too did the importance of the artist. Wagner’s grail order was as distasteful to the East German left in the 1970s as it had been two decades earlier. Crucially, however, the question of whether or not Wagner intended *Parsifal* as an endorsement of the order’s fundamental principles was no longer central to the opera’s reception. The construct of revolutionary art had expanded to encompass that which posed a challenge to existing conditions irrespective of authorial intent.

Interesting in this context are Konwitschny’s reflections on the role of the director in stagings of canonic opera. He explains: “It is not our responsibility to stage these works as

---

<sup>98</sup> SA-AdK Inszenierungsdokumente 840B: Regiebuch, 234.

the authors originally intended; how could that even happen? Our job is to ask specific, important questions in such a way that they stimulate discussion. The operas themselves are the material; they are no end in themselves.”<sup>99</sup> In the case of *Parsifal*, this separation of author and text liberated East German directors to embrace those aspects of the opera that most perturbed its twentieth-century critics. Their defetishization of the grail rituals, of the aura of *Kunstreligion* in which *Parsifal* has historically been shrouded, and of Wagner himself, shifted the redemptive emphasis of the opera from resolution towards the unknown. Its power lay in its scope to illustrate the status quo, be it the grail order, the GDR’s socialist regime, or late capitalist society, as simply one rather than the only mode of existence. Herein lay its appeal in a world where dreams of a tangible utopia were rapidly being extinguished. As Heiner Müller observed in 1993, “utopia is ... nothing more than the refusal to acknowledge the given conditions, the reality, as the only possibilities; it is therefore the drive for the impossible.”<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> Barbara Beyer, trans. Gundula Kreuzer and Paul Chaikin, “Interviews with Contemporary Opera Directors, Selected from Barbara Beyer’s *Warum Oper? Gespräche mit Opernregisseuren* (2005),” *The Opera Quarterly* 27, nos. 2-3 (2011): 307-17; here 310.

<sup>100</sup> Monika Beer, “Heiner Müller, der Regisseur der *Tristan*-Neuinszenierung: ‘Es gibt Stellen, wo ich wirklich verzweifle...’,” *Gondroms Festspielmagazin* (1993): 2-12; here 3.